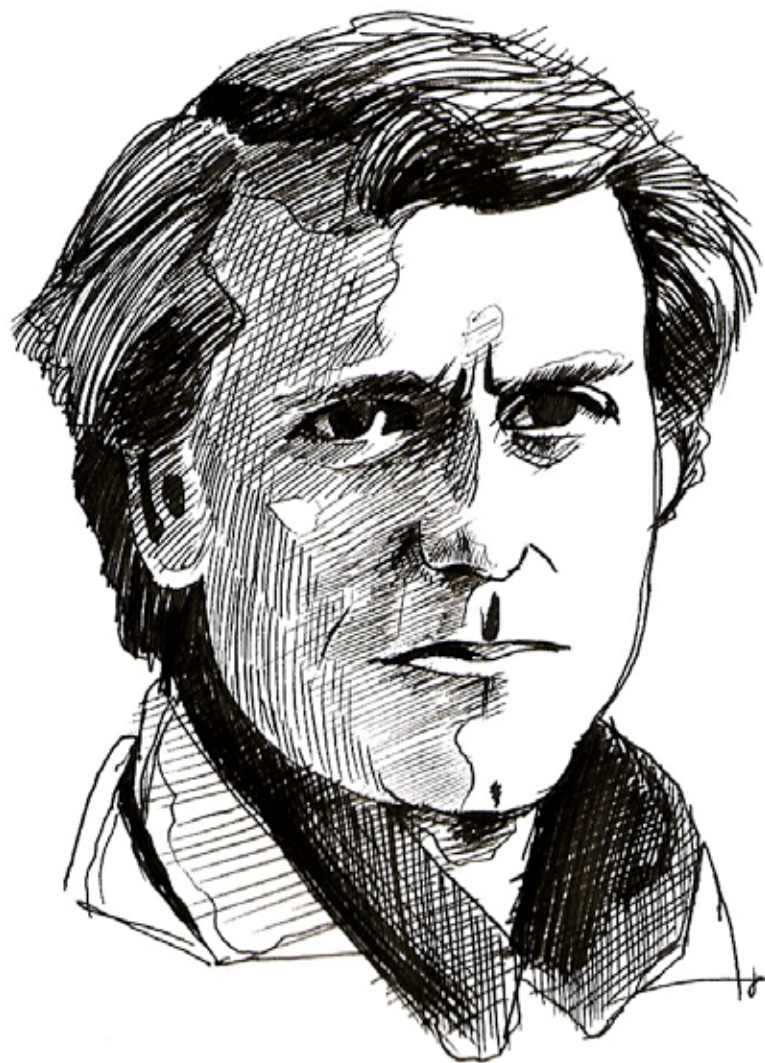


DELLILLO: the Art of Retrospection

BY FRANK GUAN



In 1971, Don DeLillo published his first novel, *Americana*, within which a novelist, not the main character, fantasizes about his future life. He lives alone, in a remote place, venerated by the younger generation, sporadically visited by young admirers. I don't know how many of DeLillo's young admirers he actually receives in person, but thirty-six years after *Americana*, his influence on succeeding generations of American novelists has become and remains tremendous. He holds particular appeal for a certain subset of college-aged males¹ who discover in his books a matching and more articulate counterpart for their own mania for comprehension, their thirst to know what's going, as they say, on. What, after all, does one read a DeLillo novel for? Not for his characters, at least not for a long time. Rather one seeks to sate a hunger for plot and setting – in the widest possible sense of those words. Plot not just as a series of events, but as the motive force behind each event, behind all events taken as a whole. Setting not just as backdrop, but as foreground, underpinning and sky. Perhaps it is best not to call such books social novels, but novels in search of a society. One may even go so far as to say that the novels are an attempt to reconstitute the fragments of an exploded society. Frequently misread as a prophet, in reality DeLillo is an elegist. If headlines often seem torn from his books, this is less

1 Quite a few of whom become novelists, or try to.

from a delving into an unimaginable future² rather than out of a formulation of existing cultural latencies. The uncanny coincidence between the Bhopal chemical spill and the publication of *White Noise*, in which an “airborne toxic event” forces the evacuation of the narrator's home town shouldn't obscure the fact that lethal chemical spills, often quite intentional, had been going on since well before the mid 1980s. What *was* new³ to a DeLillo recently returned from Greece was the depth to which television had permeated the public consciousness, to the point of altering the deep self and language in its image and likeness. The “airborne toxic event” is a classic DeLillo symbol, serving as much to drive the plot forward as to fuse disparate phenomena into a fixed pattern. One could say that in a DeLillo novel, plot and symbol do not exist in separate dimensions; and in the middle novels such as *Libra*, the concept of “plot” explicitly becomes the core metaphor of American society: not quite in the literary sense of plot as narrative, or even the social sense of plot as conspiracy, but both at once. What's most striking about the middle novels is DeLillo's projective capability, the balance with which he presents his meditations on society and his individual characters as seamlessly and simultaneously as light passes through stacked lenses.

The front cover shows what can only be a city. Its negative graces the back cover. At the center, nearest to the lens, wholly black, a church steeple rises, squarish and tapering into a square, pyramidal roof. The roof is capped by a black cross, solid, neither slender nor thick, somehow at once stable and brittle. To the right and left, in the distance, various other buildings emerge from the light fog and present their small sharp dark grey rectangular outlines against the pale silver clouds that hide the sky. But the photograph is dominated (there is no other word for it) by the two grey stripes which stretch from the storm clouds to the earth, and which one recognizes only belatedly as towers, as human buildings built by humans. The steeple, as it turns out,

2 The best example of this today would be, of course, Thomas Pynchon. If DeLillo is, so to speak, “post-explosion,” then Pynchon is the explosion, that is, the Sixties.

3 Then, that is.

stands not at the center, but slightly to the left of center. To the right of the right tower, a winged object soars, tilting left. On both covers, the ten copper letters of the title are split perfectly in half by the gap between the two towers.

This photograph⁴, taken by André Kertész, graces the jacket of DeLillo's eleventh novel, *Underworld*, and is quite possibly the greatest book jacket of all time. It is entirely befitting that an author whose two greatest novels (*Libra* and *Underworld*) have “dialectic” titles should have a photograph in which dualities are so strongly suggested (heaven and earth, foreground and background, black and white, left and right, two towers, two words), a photograph which is itself duplicated in negative. The photographed city, New York, has been DeLillo's home from his early youth to the present-day; you could call New York itself DeLillo's most enduring character. David Bell, the protagonist of his first novel *Americana*, flees his life as a New York ad executive; in *Great Jones Street*, Bucky Wunderlick, burned-out rock icon, hunkers down in a New York tenement. Lyle and Pammy, the dual protagonists of *Players*, live and work in New York, as do Glen Sely and Moll Robbins, the likewise dual protagonists in *Running Dog*. The pop culture department of the university of *White Noise* is staffed by New York exiles, *Libra* opens with a young Lee Oswald riding the trains of New York, etc.. DeLillo's latest novel, *Falling Man*, which I'll get around to soon, is set mostly in New York. The weather in New York is⁶ not always cloudy, not always doom-pregnant, but DeLillo's New York is every bit as grim and majestic as the Kertész photograph makes it out to be.

The church stands in the foreground. Though it is not the most prominent structure in the picture, it is the darkest one. It is impossible to imagine Don DeLillo

4 Black-and-white photography itself makes for an excellent metaphor for DeLillo's aesthetic: both require a forensic eye that paradoxically infuses the physical with mystery, both are fundamentally historical while remaining dependent on the present. It's interesting that DeLillo himself cites film as one of his formative influences: watching an Antonioni film (cited in the very first pages of DeLillo's first novel), one receives similar inner impressions as when reading DeLillo.

5 Quite frankly the only word possible.

6 (probably)

without the Jesuits, who taught him to think at Fordham University; though lapsed, his style and his rhetoric are inescapably religious: sonorous, weighted, firmly cadenced, intentional. Like Joyce⁷, whom he greatly admires, DeLillo experiences literature as a kind of individual church, capable of presenting the transcendent without the dilutions and mirages of the abstract or the communal. There is an emphasis on the earthy, sacred nature of language: language as sound, the weird and total alchemy of thing and word:

“This is a long way, Nick. We're a long way from home.”
“The Bronx.”

We laughed.

“Yes. That place, that word. Rude, blunt – what else do we call it?”

“Crunching,” I said.

“Yes. It's like three words they've crunched together.”

“It's like talking through broken teeth.”
(*Underworld*, 73)

It was after midnight but there was an all-night delicatessen around the corner. She got dressed and went downstairs, surprised to find the streets anything but empty. The newsstand was still doing business, the deli, the bagel noshery, the pizza-souvlaki joint, the bars, the ice cream store, the hamburger place. It was still warm and people were in shirtsleeves and shorts and denims and tank tops and sandals and house slippers. Some elderly men and women sat outside their apartment building in beach chairs, gesturing, munching olives and nuts. Everyone was eating. Wherever she looked there were mouths moving, people handling food, passing it around, cartons of French fries, sugar cones with double scoops, and talking, hollering, tissue paper drifting in the light air. An average street. Nothing special. Not a theater in sight to account for all these people. All eating. Oral New York. Declaiming through the slush of mouthfuls of food. Lapping and crunching. Perennial ranter. The babble king of cities. Pammy had to stand in line. The counterman licked

7 Patron saint of lapsed Catholics.

his mustache and rolled his eyes.

She emerged with a small bag of groceries. The ghost engines droned everywhere – down sewers, under basement stairways, in air conditioners and cracks in the pavement. All these complicated textures. Clownish taxis bearing down. Sodium-vapor lamps. The city was unreasonably insistent on its own fibrous beauty, the woven arrangements of decay and genius that raised to one’s sensibility a challenge to exert itself. Silhouettes of trees on rooftops. Garbagemen at midnight rimming metal cans along the pavement. And always this brassy demanding, a soul that imposes and burdens and defrauds, half mad, but free with its tribal bounty, sized to immense design. (*Players*, 206-207)

Even in an earlier and lesser novel like *Players*, DeLillo was capable, as the second passage above shows, of literally breath-taking elegance in prose, compressed and expansive at once, steeped in the passion of ambivalence. It’s tempting for both admirers and critics of DeLillo to pencil him in as a “conceptual” novelist, but in fact many of his most abstruse passages spring from a very concrete curiosity that big cities seem to inspire in their denizens. DeLillo’s muse is nothing less than the metropolis itself, and his fiction displays a similar resistance to easy description. Taken as a whole, these four thousand pages constitute nothing less than the most penetrating and rich history of cold war America ever⁸ composed, and a history, I might add, of which a nation *which lacks any cohesive vision of the last sixty years of its past* just might stand in desperate need.

III *Falling Man* is Don DeLillo’s fourteenth novel. As Mark Greif points out in the *London Review of Books*⁹, its

8 And excluding the second coming of Tolstoy, the most penetrating and rich history of cold war America that will ever be composed.

9 “Alzheimer’s America,” *London Review of Books*, 5 July 2007. Unlike the *New York Review of Books*, whose entire archives are open from any Stanford IP address and which is better anyways, you’ll have to trek to Green to read the *LRB*’s non-featured articles. It’s worth the trip in this case, though.

plot closely resembles that of *Players*: the narration tracks, in alternation, the lives of a married couple as they meander about the greater New York area. But while *Players* tracks the disintegration of its central dyad (Lyle becomes anomically involved with leftist terrorists who plan to blow up the city’s financial center, Pammy goes on a vacation with a gay couple that proves no less empty and destructive), *Falling Man* runs in quite the opposite direction. Instead of aimless sundering we have a reconciliation of sorts, as Keith Neudecker, the estranged husband, returns to Lianne, his wife, and their son after surviving the collapse of the World Trade Center. He goes before others: from *The Names* (1982), whose protagonist returns to his wife and son after becoming fascinated with a murderous language cult (just read the book, it’s excellent) onward, DeLillo’s plots (as opposed to the conspiracies which nest within them) have tended overwhelmingly towards some sort of reunion, awkward and incomplete as it may be¹⁰. In some sense, DeLillo’s male protagonists¹¹ are always moving towards a peace of some sorts, be it with their women, the society they live in, and/or death. In the early novels, their attempts to reintegrate or regenerate themselves end only in an isolation whose meager solace lies in a clearer recognition of the pathologies of the (sub)culture from which they fled. But after Greece¹², something changes. With its clarity, brilliance, history, and open, un-American space, Greece confronts DeLillo essentially, placed before him the incontrovertible evidence that the world of his early period (largely dark, cloistered, filthy, and recent) was not the whole world. Greece allowed him to see his country anew, allowed him to perceive certain, if not positive, at least ambiguous aspects of the culture and especially of the “small society” of the family that were as difficult to express as they were unequivocally real. In stretching his talents to accommodate these elements of American

10 Even the Oswald of *Libra* begins to gather the makings of a purpose to his existence before his own assassination.

11 It would be interesting for someone to track the development of the DeLillo man from its obvious predecessors, Hemingway man and Camus man (probably Beckett man too), to give us one of those ape to ape-man to man diagrams, only in reverse.

12 DeLillo’s trip was funded by a Guggenheim grant,

life, DeLillo became indisputably “great.” Perhaps redemption is too strong a word, perhaps the phrase “a separate peace|” along the lines of *A Farewell to Arms* is truer to the fact. But call this opening-out what you will, what becomes possible from the middle novels on is, ultimately, affirmative and living, in collusion with and in spite of the poisons and perils of postmodern society. Only the blocked novelist Bill Gray of *Mao II* truly perishes; in all the other post-Greece novels, the protagonists manage to salvage some remnant of a common life, no matter how contaminated by the culture at large. Jack Gladney, the Hitler studies professor, pulls out of a clichéd murder of one of his wife’s lovers and returns to his family. Nick Shay, *Underworld*’s underwhelming semi-hero, begins to tell his wife about his violent youth, something he’d refused to do for decades. The entire novel *Libra* is itself an attempt to make Lee Harvey Oswald’s life of confused exclusion into a part of the society that excluded him. Similarly Eric Packer, the ultra-rich currency speculator of *Cosmopolis*¹³, manages to achieve some sense of life and peace despite his impending murder. Similarly, Keith ends up in the third and last section of *Falling Man* in Las Vegas, playing poker professionally as a kind of memorial for the poker games he once played with his colleagues, still married, still distant, traumatized, but not, in the end, estranged. He’s found the weird, incomplete equilibrium of his predecessors, which readers are meant, I think, to read as “ultimately, redemptive,” as the inner flap of the book jacket informs me.

But if Keith’s story is meant to be redemptive, is there “enough” of Keith to redeem¹⁴? I can see two counter-arguments to this, one psychological and the other psycho-cultural. First, that his numbness and near-aphasia is the point: that is, that his affectlessness is perfectly normal for a man whose workplace has been destroyed and whose friends¹⁵ are dead, and maybe that this inexpressiveness is somehow representative of some larger numbness in American society, an inability to respond properly, to “come to terms” with the

13 Pretty much an awful book however you look at it; I’ll try to explain how and why later.

14 This being the James Wood objection.

15 Such as they are: when he writes about male friendship, the head-butting contest in *Underworld* seems to be the best DeLillo can do.

event called 9/11: Keith’s thoughts, related in DeLillo’s flattened free indirect style, come to revolve around the latent violence in turns of phrase in poker such as “Make them bleed”. Yet at the same time the novel itself seems to want very much to come to terms with the event itself, as the brief sketches of a hijacker’s life which dot the novel literally crash into Keith as he sits in the office. And of course Keith’s story alone is not all of *Falling Man*, which besides Keith and the hijacker also encompasses the story of Lianne, who turns out to be more traumatized than her husband: when she inadvertently comes across the performance artist, also named Falling Man, who leaps from high points in the city with a suit, suitcase, and harness and hangs in mid-air until the authorities take him down, she freezes, horror-struck, until her husband and son rescue her. It is Lianne who strikes the woman in a nearby apartment blasting Middle Eastern music. More than anything else, *Falling Man* is constructed synapse by synapse: it wishes very much to be read as a psychological narrative, without recourse to any larger frameworks¹⁶, and in this it seems more in line with DeLillo’s intriguing 2001 novel *The Body Artist* more than with the big canvas novels of the 80s and 90s. *Underworld* was magisterial, triumphant, valedictory. But its retrospective form already implied a lack of suitable material in the present, a lack that DeLillo very directly tied to the end of the cold war:

“Many things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck. Things have no limits now. Money has no limits. I don’t understand money anymore. Money is undone. Violence is undone, violence is easier now, it’s uprooted, out of control, it has no measure anymore, it has no level of values.” (*Underworld*, 76)

Clara Sax, the speaker in the passage above, is an artist, who has taken as her latest project the painting of decommissioned Air Force bombers, remaking the gray winged

16 It’s true that some geopolitical talk occurs in the exchanges between Lianne’s mother and her German, most likely ex-leftist terrorist, boyfriend: Nina, the mother, is outraged by the attacks while Martin, the German, offers a textbook Marxist justification for them. However, their debates don’t have a lot of steam behind them, and serve more as a backdrop to Lianne and Keith’s stories.

behemoths in desert reds and oranges, much as *Underworld* itself rewrites the cold war, conceived and executed as a clash of shadowed systems, into the dazzle, pain, and waste of human language. The DeLillovian vision, thoroughly of its time, sees money as merely the skin of a culture’s power. It is violence, and in particular the massive indiscriminate death of atomic weapons, which constitutes the core of power, and which most of the characters in *Underworld* resist in some way or another. Yet it is precisely this apocalypse-level violence which makes the citizens of cold war America a society, which provides, in a sense, the grounding for their language: “We’re all gonna die!” screams Lenny Bruce over and over in *Underworld*, and it’s precisely this “all” around which cold war culture, and Don DeLillo, and Don DeLillo’s aesthetic¹⁷, revolved for forty-four years. But what happens when violence becomes the skin, and money the core? DeLillo tried applying his old tricks to the world of finance and globalization in *Cosmopolis* and came out with an arid novel, which wasn’t new: *Players* was just as dry, that beautiful passage above notwithstanding. What was new was how little the world in the book corresponded with the real world. An artist whose art thrived on the pulse of current events suddenly could no longer tell what was current, nor what was an event¹⁸. It’s too early to tell what *Falling Man* represents for Don DeLillo’s art: he practically forces you to read him as a whole, and as Beckett’s Molloy surmises, “Perhaps there is no whole, before you’re dead.” But if his recent novels indicate any sort of trend, then it seems one can no longer come out of his books with one’s hunger for setting¹⁹ sated. Don DeLillo is an indisputably great literary artist, and an indispensable chronicler of the past. But to take him and his aesthetic as a model for writing about contemporary existence seems, I think, misguided. His aesthetic doesn’t just take Cold War America as a subject, but is molded in its

17 And his sense of humor too; his last three books, *Falling Man* included, simply aren’t funny. Much of what kept the early novels from drying up altogether was their comedy.

18 As he himself says quite openly: in a recent interview with a German newspaper, he declares, “I don’t know America anymore”: “Ich kenne Amerika nicht mehr.”

19 Or “situation” or “hunger to know the outer world”

image and likeness. Just as there can only be a limited distinction between a photograph and its subject matter, one is simply unable to divorce DeLillo’s style from his subject²⁰. If you take DeLillo as a model, you are adopting not just his styling and shaping of words, but are claiming that entire period of the American past which those words depict to be, in essence, the same as that period of the American present in which you live. Of course there are continuities between 1978 or 1989 and 2008; a lot of what DeLillo said about America then still holds true today, a testament to the acuity of his perceptions. But something new has been introduced since then whose essence the “way of DeLillo” seems incapable of grasping: the last three novels serve as proof of either the failure of that aesthetic to depict the present (*Cosmopolis*) or a turn away from the ambition to capture an entire society (*The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*) towards individual experience for its own sake, an admirable alternative. If DeLillo himself is abandoning the aesthetic that powered his best novels, it’s because he himself knows that it doesn’t work anymore; do you really think that anyone could use Don DeLillo’s style better than Don DeLillo? That’s a straw man, I know, but at the same time his style does act as the vessel for an entire method of thought (which doesn’t work anymore!), and it’s hard to write like DeLillo without thinking like him. But it won’t get you anywhere – you’ll basically be presenting photographs of cows and calling them houses, very earnestly. You won’t be Don DeLillo, and you won’t have the perception he had in the 1980s, you’ll be Don Quixote, ensnared by the forms of a past world²¹.

20 Such an aesthetic, referential to the very bone, spares him from having to wrestle with the problem of narration itself, that is, from meta-fictional vertigo, as it accommodates the subject so thoroughly that n-th order observer doubts [where n>1] have nowhere to stick to.

21 As for how exactly one “would” describe the flattening of the once-great globe under the weight of capital, of course that can’t be set out without some artistic exemplar. I’d point to Wallace as the American who comes the closest right now, but it’s too soon to tell what he’s cooking up. Perhaps the very basis of American fiction from Twain through Hemingway to DeLillo and Wallace, the man fleeing from society and the past has become thoroughly exhausted.